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ABSTRACT

This collection of brief reports on educational matters of interest to parents contains the most popular titles in the Report to Parents series issued by the National Association of Elementary School Principals as a service to its members. Reports cover the following topics: (1) buying books for children; (2) dealing with child abuse; (3) helping children cope with death; (4) helping with homework; (5) facilitating parent-teacher conferences; (6) testing for educational purposes with competency, achievement, and aptitude tests; (7) choosing a preschool; and (8) helping children who are getting ready to read. (RH)

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Report to Parents

a collection

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**National Association of
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This collection of **REPORT TO PARENTS** consists of the most popular titles issued by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) as a service to its members. **REPORT TO PARENTS** is usually distributed several times during the school year, as a single-page discussion of a single topic and is intended to help building-level administrators strengthen their relations with parents. Principals typically a) reprint the contents in their school newsletters, or b) reproduce the newsletter with the school's name at the bottom, and send it home with a youngster's report card.

We have produced this collection to satisfy the many requests we have received for individual titles.

Additional copies of this collection may be ordered from the NAESP Educational Products Center at \$2.00 per copy for members and \$2.50 per copy for nonmembers. Quantity pricing is available upon request.

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Report to Parents

Young Marilyn, just beginning school, spells "relief" by sounding out each letter in the name of a highly advertised antacid. We adults laugh, and perhaps repeat the story to friends.

Marilyn is not only being bright and clever. She is also sending a signal that she wants to read. Many children, perhaps your child, get so curious about reading that they often learn their first words by accident: spelling "relief," following along with a favorite book, recognizing the words for their morning cereal, identifying street signs.

Adults and children alike are bombarded by thousands of messages from newspapers, magazines, television, radio, books, and now computers. We live in the Information Age. How can children learn to decide which messages are valuable?

Reading breaks the code of the Information Age, and books--as the carriers of that code--are crucial in enabling children to interpret and enjoy a world overflowing with information.

Helping children select books is a challenge. How do we help them choose a book that's "good" or "right?" The right book involves the child in positive experiences: humor, excitement, suspense, adventure, empathy, information, just plain enjoyment. Setting rules for choosing books is not easy, but here are a few guidelines:

- No book should make fun of failure, or slur racial, ethnic, age, or gender differences, or laugh at handicaps.
- The book should be honest, and not patronize the reader, regardless of the reader's age.
- If the book is fiction, the plot should be believable and the characters should have understandable emotions. Nonfiction should be accurate and free of complexities and technicalities.
- If the book is just for fun, like a Dr. Seuss story, it should be lively, colorful, and humorous.
- Books for the very young should have numerous lively pictures. Books for children just learning to read should balance illustrations with a short text and a simple plot and characters. For older readers, books should relate to the child's specific, particular interests.

A good place to start is with the proven and popular:

Preschoolers and kindergarten-age children: Mother Goose; Ape in a Cape, an alphabet book by Fritz Eichenberg; Numbers of Things by Helen Oxenbury; Colors by John Reiss; picture books by Richard Scarry; Little Simon Says "I Can, Can You?" by Carolyn Bracken; the Sesame Street books; An Owl and Three Pussycats by Alice and Martin Provensen.

Early school-age children: the Dr. Seuss series; Maurice Sendak books, including the popular Where the Wild Things Are; The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats; Harriet the Spy by Louise Fitzhugh; Hang On, Hester! by Wende and Harry Devlin; Anybody Home? by Susan Bonners; I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly, retold by various authors; One, Two, Three--Ah-Choo by Dick Gackenbach; The Tale of Thomas Mead by Pat Hutchins; the A. A. Milne series; The Kid's Encyclopedia of Things to Make and Do by Richard and Ronda Rasmussen.

Older children: Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt; The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien; A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'Engle; the "Little House" series by Laura Ingalls Wilder; The Cat Ate My Gymsuit by Paula Danziger; Danny, the Champion of the World by Roald Dahl; The Year Mom Won the Pennant by Matt Christopher; Encyclopedia Brown: Boy Detective by Donald Sobol; Alan Mendelsohn, The Boy From Mars by Daniel M. Pinkwater; Kate Alone by Patricia Lee Gauch.

These are only suggestions. Our school librarian will help with other selections.

Regardless of your child's age, poetry, nonfiction, fantasy, and fiction can be exciting. For that matter, so can a reference book. All it takes is a curious child, involved parents and teachers, and a book.

Report to Parents

Child Abuse

Approximately 500,000 children are sexually abused each year. We hear about these tragic incidents to children more and more not because molestation is becoming more prevalent, but because the facts are coming out into the open.

Thus we now know that the typical "pedophile," a person who is an abuser of children, is not a passing stranger. Rather, he (nine out of ten are men) is more likely to be someone the child knows and trusts--a neighbor, a baby-sitter, a friend, a member of the family perhaps.

That makes the threat no less real. Reliable estimates put the number of molested children each year at more than half a million, with three-fourths of them being under the age of five. One in eight girls will be sexually abused before they reach the age of 18.

What can parents do? Child psychologists, pediatricians, and law enforcement officials suggest a number of steps you can take to reduce the risks.

* First and foremost, teach your children about sex at their beginning level of understanding. Use real names for private body parts. Explain that while hugs and kisses among the family are signs of love and affection, no adult has the right to touch or fondle a child's private body parts. Teach your children to firmly object to any adult who tries, and to yell and tell.

A booklet with simple text and lots of pictures to help the small child understand the difference between "good" and "bad" touching is offered free by the American Medical Association. Write for Sex Talk for a Safe Child, Order Dept., OP 234, AMA, P.O. Box 10946, Chicago, IL 60610.

* Believe your child if he or she claims sexual abuse. Children almost never lie about something so alien to their experience. If it happens, your child should tell you at once. Or, if you're not available, tell a grandparent or the principal or other school staff member.

* Make sure your children can state their full name and address (including city and state) and telephone number (including area code). This information is essential for police to help locate you, as parents, if your children stray or are taken from home.

* Never leave your children in an unattended car.

* If your child gets lost in a shopping center, looking for you or going to the parking lot could be dangerous. Teach your children to go to the nearest clerk for help.

* Teach your children never to admit on the telephone that their parents are out...and never to answer the door when they are at home alone. They should also be taught how to call the police if someone tries to get into the house.

* Know your children's friends. And listen if a child says he or she no longer wants to play with a particular boy or girl. There is probably a very good reason.

On the personal level, the single most important thing you can do is develop a trusting, confiding relationship with your children. Then you can talk in a straightforward manner about such problems as molestation and help them understand the risks involved and the best ways to avoid those risks. That's the surest way to keep children safe.

Report to Parents

Helping Children Cope with Death

By the time they reach 18, five children out of 100 will have lost a parent through death. Far more will have experienced the death of a close friend or relative. Psychologists say that the children who are best able to cope with this searing experience are those who have been well-prepared, in an honest and caring manner, to accept death as part of the life cycle.

Children prove to be far more capable of dealing with the loss of a parent (or perhaps brother or sister) if they not only receive ample love and comfort and support, but if they understand the facts.

It is without question a tough job to talk with children about death and dying but not to do so is to leave them unprotected from the pain and bewilderment that accompanies this inevitable experience. Children's imaginations are so active that their fears and fantasies of death often are more disturbing than the reality. Children need to know how death occurs. They must understand that death results from real, physical causes--not from some malevolent spirit and above all not because the child has misbehaved. Children also need to know about funerals and interment, so that they are not disturbed by these rites.

Following are some useful things parents can teach children so that when a close member of the family dies, they are emotionally equipped to work through their feelings of loss.

- Discuss death in exact terms. People who die do not "pass away" or "go to sleep." "Passing" can become scary to a child who passes from grade to grade, and "going to sleep" can turn bedtime into terror. Use the words "die" and "death." Arrange a parting visit in the case of a terminally ill parent or relative. Bidding a loved one farewell is important to children.

- When someone they love dies, it is important to allow children to freely express their sorrow, lest unresolved grief follow them into adulthood. We all learn to mourn by experience--shedding tears over a dead pet, or sharing the grief of friends or relatives whose loved ones have died. Children can be helped to accept the loss by discussing pictures and mementos of the dead person, and talking out their memories and feelings.

- Children unable to cope with their grief give signals in the form of significant changes in behavior. Prolonged depression, insistence that the death has not really occurred, acting out anger--these are pleas for help. Death is especially hard for children to accept if it comes by violence. Psychologists, social workers, and ministers are familiar with such reactions and may be worth turning to for professional counsel.

- Children need to be reassured again and again that they will be taken care of and not abandoned. Abandonment is a child's greatest fear, and children see death as a kind of desertion. They need constant comfort. They also need as much stability in their lives as circumstances permit.

- Allow children to see you grieve and express emotions. If you struggle not to cry, they are likely to conclude that grief is to be borne in silence. Anger, denial, guilt, and fear are all normal parts of grief. Children need to work through these feelings.

With time and continuing reassurance from their parents and other members of the family, children can come through the grieving period with healthy memories of a loved one. Parents must help children realize that wrenching though death is, the family spirit of love and support and mutual achievement is still there.

Report to Parents

Helping with Homework

Homework is a very important part of children's education. Teachers can present new material in the classroom, go over the main ideas and issues, show films and videotapes, illustrate by example, stimulate class discussion, and answer questions. But students must do their own learning. Like the rest of us, they tend to put off doing so until they feel they must. The moment of truth usually comes at home when they have to sit down with an assignment.

Some students dislike and even fear homework--primarily because they don't know how to study. You can help, for there are techniques for learning how to learn. You can help your young learners to develop them, and equally important, give encouragement and support.

Provide a quiet place to study. A desk in the bedroom is good, but the kitchen table will do. Be sure the light is adequate. Have a dictionary, paper, and pencils handy. Turn the TV down--or better, off.

Set a specific study hour. Be firm in establishing a nightly homework period, perhaps right after dinner. Children need to know you expect them to do homework at a regular time. Establish a habit.

However, do not make study time completely inflexible. You don't want your children to feel like prisoners to the homework schedule. The Wednesday night soccer game or Sunday picnic can be worked in. Make out a weekly study program and adjust study periods--maybe even double up on homework--in order to free up time for your children to go out.

Concentrating: Children are more likely to settle down if you have them help you choose step-by-step learning goals that are not so tough as to be overwhelming. Together you might decide they should study until they can solve one math problem or tell you the main point in a paragraph. Then once you are both satisfied that the material has been understood, it is time to go on to the next goal.

Previewing material: The prospect of absorbing a 15-page textbook chapter on the Civil War can intimidate children who do not know how to approach such an assignment. Have them make a rough "map" of the chapter by reading the introduction, section heads, and summary. With the "map" as a general guide, have them look for main ideas. What were the major causes of the Civil War? Why did the South secede? Have them stop at the end of each section and test themselves on what they have read.

Taking notes can be a time-saver. No one can remember everything in a textbook or everything a teacher says. So it is a good idea to take notes. But how to decide on what is important to take notes on? Well, what the teacher has stressed in class is probably important. So are facts the textbook puts in CAPITAL LETTERS or italics.

Self-testing. Many children waste time going over material they already understand. Use the textbook or your children's notes to make up test questions for them. If they know most of the answers in one section but few in another, it is clear where more study is needed.

Discourage cramming. Studying should not be left until the night before a test. Cramming tends to increase anxiety, and anxiety interferes with the ability to comprehend. Real learning occurs when study is spaced over a period of days or weeks.

In reading through these suggestions, you may think they call for more of your time than you really want to spare. Particularly at first, working with your children on their homework does entail time. However, they will quickly learn how to set their own goals, preview material, take notes, devise self-tests, and so on. And you will have made an invaluable investment in their education and in their future.

Report to Parents

Parent-Teacher Conferences

"What did you do in school today?" you eagerly ask as your children return home. "Nothing," is many youngsters' standard response. So you sigh and remain hungry for information about whether the classroom is proving to be productive or a pain for your offspring.

But there is no need for you to remain in the dark. We are happy to arrange a parent-teacher conference, and place great value on these meetings with you. Such conferences offer an opportunity for you to find out how your children are getting along with their classmates, in which areas they excel and which may be giving them difficulty, and what you can do at home to build on their strengths and overcome weak spots.

From our perspective, the conference also has great value. Teachers are helped considerably by getting to know parents and by gaining from them information and insights that can enhance the children's classroom experiences. Simply linking an adult presence (that is, you) with the unique blend of curiosity, drive, and intelligence that make up each child's personality helps teachers form a more complete picture of that child.

Or perhaps a conference is needed to mediate a conflict. Whatever the reason for the meeting, an important thing to keep in mind is that we want most of all to help you, and to make your child's school experience a happy one. Following are some pointers that may make any parent-teacher conference productive and pleasant.

- Schedule your appointment in advance. If you have initiated the conference, it will be helpful if you give advance notice to teachers, particularly if test scores or past records must be unearthed. (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 gives you the right to see all of your child's records.) If we call the meeting, we will do our best to schedule the conference when it is convenient for you.
- Be prepared. Before the meeting, jot down pros and cons of your child's school experiences. Bring this list with you, as a reminder of any experiences you want to call attention to. Also bring a list of questions and, perhaps, examples of work your child has done at home. You should leave the conference confident that you understand the school's programs and your child's performance in them. We would like you to view the conference as a time to educate us about your child's capabilities.
- Be candid. Tell teachers and principals what is going on at home, if you believe it bears on your child's behavior. It is now well known that periods both of gain and of family stress--a new job, remarriage, new baby, divorce, or serious illness--all significantly affect a child's behavior and school performance. Please be assured that whatever information you relate will be confidential.
- Focus on the instructional environment. Particularly at a meeting that has been called to try to end some unacceptable school behavior or poor academic performance, emotions are very likely to surface. The result may be to divert attention from the business at hand, which is to examine the child's performance in the classroom and determine how that performance can be improved or enhanced.
- Try to resolve any questions or issues with the teacher. Avoid escalating matters by involving higher authorities. The teacher has day-to-day responsibility for your child's progress, can best help you understand what the school is trying to accomplish, and perhaps at the same time, can help your child see that schooling is an important business.

Please remember that the school's primary goal is the education of all children. We want them to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally; to learn, have fun, make friends, and follow the rules. The principal's door is always open. Your children's successes in school are our successes--and we are genuinely eager to talk to you about them.

Testing

Report to Parents

The "crisis in education": you heard about it for most of last year and no doubt you are still reading about it this year. Actually, the current "crisis" has been brewing for several years, with many positive results. The most notable has been a genuine and wholehearted effort in many states and localities toward improving instruction in their schools.

Another result of the current scrutiny of American education has been a renewed emphasis on testing--as a way of measuring students' progress in school, of identifying weak spots or gaps in their knowledge, and of setting standards of performance. But testing is a subject that is often misunderstood and occasionally feared. To answer questions you might have about some of the tests currently in use, we offer the following abbreviated definitions:

Competency tests measure how well students perform certain basic tasks, be they school skills (using multiplication facts, writing grammatically correct sentences) or life skills (balancing a checkbook, following instructions on job applications). Many states (39, in fact) have enacted legislation that requires students to receive a passing grade on a minimum competency exam before they receive a high school diploma.

Competency tests cannot, of course, measure everything a child learns in school or determine precisely how well a student will function in adult society. Instead, competency tests are viewed as a way of ensuring that a high school diploma has meaning--that everyone who holds a diploma will be able to perform basic reading, writing, and computational tasks. In some states, students who fail the mandated competency tests receive a certificate of attendance in place of a diploma. Mostly, however, the tests are used as early warning signals--to identify students who need help and special attention so that their academic skills can be brought up to par by graduation time.

Achievement tests try to measure what a student has learned in the past. Often these tests are ones that teachers devise to determine how well students have absorbed what has been taught. When your children are asked to write answers to such questions as "Who was the 35th President of the United States?" or "What is 1/3 of 27?" they are taking achievement tests.

Not all achievement tests are homemade by teachers. There are many large-scale achievement tests that attempt to measure student achievement on a regional or national basis. An example of such a test is the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; questions on it and on other such national tests reflect the publishers' "best guess" as to what children are taught in school.

Aptitude tests try to measure students' potential for learning or their capacity for future performance. Tests that measure problem-solving skills or intelligence (IQ tests) generally fall into this category.

While the distinctions between achievement tests and aptitude tests may sound clear, the experts agree that in actual fact it is not always possible to tell just what a test is measuring. It may be safer to say that all tests measure some combination of aptitude and achievement. Whether a test calls itself an aptitude or an achievement test probably reflects more the general purposes to which the test is put than the actual nature of the questions on the test.

Among the primary concerns of all testing programs are that the tests be developed fairly, without bias; that the conditions in which students take the test be conducive to good performance; and that when test results are used to make instructional placement decisions, other pertinent facts (for example, the student's motivation to do well) be considered.

If you have any questions about a test that your child has taken or is about to take, or if you want to discuss test results, please call for an appointment. As educators we want to assure you that no test is an end in itself. Rather, tests are simply tools of the trade--aids we use to do our jobs more effectively. And no job is more important to us than that of providing the best possible education for your children, and helping you to understand what goes on in school.

Choosing a Preschool

Report to Parents

Taking the time and care to select the right preschool program is one of the most important things you can do for your child between the ages of two and five years.

A good preschool program can help your child develop. It teaches social skills, how to share toys, and play together. It stresses physical coordination and develops motor skills in other ways. Most important, it introduces youngsters to the joys of organized learning--an appetite that, once created, carries over into the school years. Research has shown time and again that students with a good preschool background do better in school than do those without this rewarding experience.

There are all kinds of preschools. Many are run on a nonprofit basis by churches, public schools, other community agencies, or as parent cooperatives. Others are for-profit businesses operated by individuals or franchised by national corporations. Most offer half-day programs, though many provide full-day care for children of working mothers.

Most states and communities require that preschools meet health and safety standards. A state license is usually needed by preschools operating more than four hours a day. It certifies that the facility has adequate space and staff and complies with fire, sanitary, and other standards. Staffing recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children calls for two adults for every 16 children, aged two to three, and for every 20 children, aged four to five.

Ask your local child welfare or health agency to send you a list of approved preschools. Call first to learn about their instructional program, operating hours, costs, transportation, and other essentials. Then visit those preschools that you think will best meet your child's interests and needs.

It's important that you go in person. No written description or telephone conversation can give you a feel for the happy but constructive learning environment you want for your child. Here are some guidelines to help you:

1. Talk with the staff and watch them interact with children. Do the teachers gently guide and instruct the children, answer their questions, foster their self-confidence, and appear happy in their jobs? Ask the director about the staff's early childhood education credentials, experience, and continuing training to keep up with new developments in the field.

2. Inquire about the curriculum and teaching aids. Activities should be balanced between vigorous outdoor play and quiet indoor play and learning. Do the adults use simple but correct English--not only to explain ideas and objects, but to help children build their own vocabularies? Are picture books age-appropriate, attractive, and of good literary quality? Are sturdy puzzles, construction sets, and other small items used to develop manipulative skills? Are sand, clay, water, wood, and paint readily available to stimulate creativity? The classroom should have plants, small animals, and other living things to teach children about nature. Field trips to zoos, firehouses, and other nearby attractions should be offered to expose four- and five-year-olds to the larger world beyond the home and preschool.

3. Other things to look for. You'll want to ask about payment policies. Will you be charged for snow days, for days when your child is absent, or when you're late for pickup? If the preschool offers bus transportation, how much does it cost? What about health care during school hours and insurance coverage for accidents? Are the school lunches nutritious and prepared on-site?

Make your decision primarily on the love for children and the dedication to their welfare shown by the preschool staff. Your child will benefit by your careful choice for many years to come.

Report to Parents

Getting Ready to Read

"This program," says Big Bird in a typical 'Sesame Street' episode, is brought to you by the letters **l** and **1** and the number **11**." The award-winning TV series is mostly about getting preschool children ready to read and write. You could say its sponsor is literacy—the one skill all children need to succeed in school.

Preparing children to read and write is a major parental responsibility. Long before they enter school, our children must rely on us to help them begin the mysterious process that turns spoken words communicating ideas into printed words that do the same on paper. We need to make a conscious and continuing effort to help them crack the code and make the connection.

We know much more today about how children learn to read than we did 10 years ago. Becoming a Nation of Readers, a study funded by the U.S. Department of Education, analyzes what we've learned and how to apply it, both at home and in the classroom. The study has special tips for parents.

Reading readiness takes wide knowledge. No book you or your children read will ever be fully self-explanatory. Readers fill in the gaps based on what they already know. Mary's lamb with fleece of snow may be an image few children can grasp when they've never seen a lamb or snowstorm. So give your children the broadest possible range of experiences. Take them on trips. Go to zoos, museums, parks, and movies. Talk about what you see together. Giving children the opportunity to express their views about what they see and do extends their vocabulary and ideas about the world around them.

Encourage memory and storytelling skills. Have your children describe what happens when you're not around. Ask about a nursery school outing or visit to a friend's home. Research shows that exercising memory and developing the ability to tell a complete story make reading easier later on.

Read aloud to your children. This is the most important thing you can do. Don't bore your children with stories they don't enjoy but do read their favorites again and again so that your youngsters know the plot and can follow along. Talk about what words mean. Discuss the story, asking questions that make them think not about what happens but why. Relate the story to real life: "There goes a fire truck with sirens blaring like the one in the story."

Writing helps with reading readiness. Writing helps children practice letter-sound relationships. If your youngsters can hold a piece of chalk or pencil, give them an old-fashioned chalkboard and lots of paper. If not, get a magnetic board and movable letters. Have them spell out their names. Suggest other words to make, helping them sound out letters. Show them how words build sentences and express ideas.

Carefully chosen TV programs can promote reading. "Sesame Street" and a few other children's programs are based on sound educational principles. Watch these programs with your children. Use them to extend home learning: "Big Bird says the letter **l** looks the same turned on its head. Can you think of a number that looks the same upside down?"

Do computers help? So far, there's little solid information to suggest that available computer programs can help children learn to read.

Make reading a family affair. Show your children that reading is a rewarding pursuit at any age. Encourage every family member to read, for fun and to learn. Keep books and magazines around the home. Take your children to the library often, not only to select the books they want you to read aloud but to see how many adults are also checking out reading materials.

Learning to read takes time. Most children need several years to learn to read well. Don't push too hard. Bored or discouraged children can develop an aversion to reading that lasts a long time. On the other hand, children who are guided and encouraged by parents to approach reading as a great adventure will find a wondrous world opening up before them.